

# BUILDING THE INFANTRY SQUAD LEADER: COGNITIVE, SOCIAL, AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

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**D**uring the last 15 years, the roles and responsibilities within nearly every military occupational specialty have been challenged, expanded, and at times altogether revised. The demands placed upon our military service members by the Global War on Terrorism necessitated such adaptation, and we as an Army excelled in every regard. But, in the emerging operating environment that involves both a heightened threat from peer or near-peer states as well as the rampant proliferation of non-state extremist actors, perhaps a reassessment of what platoons expect from their squad leaders is in order.

When asked to articulate the desired characteristics of a leader, paratroopers often respond with flowery language extracted from the Army Values or one of our various creeds. This is a good thing in that it demonstrates the successful inculcation of these critical concepts within our formations. But such terms do little more than offer an advantage in promotion boards if they are not backed by deliberate courses of action designed to produce Soldiers who embody these traits.

*Paratroopers from Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, engage targets during a live-fire maneuver exercise. Engineers breached a mine-wire obstacle that allowed the platoon to penetrate the objective area.*

Photos courtesy of author

In the interest of identifying a nexus of common denominators among our finest Infantry squad leaders and to determine how leaders may foster such skills within their units, platoon leaders of Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, examined feedback from their squad leaders after a battalion squad leader course and pinpointed several best practices. The outcome of this examination is a set of practical guidelines that develops the cognitive, social, and physical domains of military leadership. To elaborate, the cognitive domain focuses on how Soldiers learn and retain information, and how that information is used to solve problems and execute complex tasks. The social aspect of leadership is one of the most transformational because it is intrinsically linked to unit cohesion, morale, and esprit de corps. This domain focuses on how Soldiers perceive their organization and its members, thereby allowing them to build cohesive teams through mutual pride and trust. Development of the physical domain pertains to reinforcing functional fitness goals that are progressive, sequential, and relevant to the organization's current mission.

Before we could assess how an organization develops strong squad leaders, we first had to identify those traits most commonly associated with the ideal team leader and distinguish them from the capabilities that define an admirable squad leader.



***Confident, physically fit leaders who maintain a high degree of professionalism on and off duty are capable of nurturing environments that serve as fertile soil for growing future leaders of integrity.***

Charlie Company's squad leaders agreed uniformly that their team leaders should be trustworthy, inspiring mentors who remain adaptive in austere environments by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders. More than one squad leader described this vision as living the Army Values or personifying the NCO Creed. They believed team leaders must learn to balance the roles of enforcer and counselor by knowing their paratroopers and viewing the Army as a way of life and not merely an employment opportunity. It is self-evident that we expect our team leaders to be physically fit subject-matter experts, highly proficient in their warrior tasks and drills. While these conclusions are valid and most certainly true, we must ask as well: What more should we expect from our squad leaders? Quite a bit, in fact.

Squad leaders are the conduit between the individual paratrooper and the company fight that affects the battalion's mission. In the absence of the platoon sergeant, a senior squad leader must assume his duties. These duties consist of personnel management at the platoon level (a 400 percent or more increase in manpower), coordination with the first sergeant at the company level, and even problem-solving endeavors in the battalion realm, such as terrain and ammunition resourcing. Young squad leaders may view their role as restricted to the management and training of eight Soldiers, but this could not be further from the truth. The following are those traits most sought after in squad leaders who can remain pivotal assets in the company fight. For the duration of this article, we will refer to them as the four pillars of leadership.

**1. The Ability to Identify and Solve Problems** — Squad leaders must possess this trait personally, but they also must be able to foster an environment that encourages similar actions from others. Failure to cultivate this valuable capability among junior NCOs leads inevitably to an unending slew of problems and complaints piled upon the platoon and company leadership. This may be the most valued trait of a squad leader — a leader who sits one seat away from owning a platoon. Too often, it is the tendency of Infantrymen to lament endlessly the injustices or asymmetries of their work environment without ever approaching their first-line supervisor with assertive recommendations to rectify these deficiencies. This increasingly cumulative burden falls on their leaders. Such habits can be hard to break and may perpetuate into the realm of squad leadership. If this is allowed to happen, quality of training, initiative, and morale will suffer. The company training schedule is driven by the platoon and squad leadership's ability to foresee problems and solve them proactively. If squad leaders are not demonstrating this capability, allowing them to assume the duties of a platoon sergeant is counterproductive to their individual careers and the collective welfare of the organization.

**2. The Passion to Steward the Profession** — Squad leaders' demeanor directly impacts the warrior spirit and will of their squads. When their dissatisfaction with their life choices becomes evident, it hampers the readiness of those they lead and the morale of the entire platoon. Squad leaders must actively seek ways to build esprit de corps, promote unit cohesion, and usher paratroopers into more rewarding and demanding positions. If squad leaders do not enjoy their profession or take pride in their organization, rest assured

that their squad will follow suit. This is not an easy hurdle to overcome. Stewards of the profession who promote military culture — both Army-wide and unit specific — invariably develop paratroopers with similar degrees of motivation. Just as toxic leadership spreads like a virus, unit pride, gratifying careers, and leaders who genuinely care about their paratroopers are also contagious. Squad leaders should be living examples of the quality of life that the Army is capable of offering its high performers.

**3. The Desire to be a Role Model On and Off Duty** — Confident, physically fit leaders who maintain a high degree of professionalism on and off duty are capable of nurturing environments that serve as fertile soil for growing future leaders of integrity. At any time, squad leaders should be able to say, "Get like me," as a response to an infraction within their squad. More often than some may assume, the off-duty example set by squad leaders makes a strong impression. This is particularly true regarding Soldiers who feel they are incapable of maintaining a family in the Army and believe termination of service is the most favorable option. This, again, is a fallacy. It is the squad leader's job to be a reputable person, parent, or spouse by setting the example for others to follow when the uniform comes off. We are in a serious business, and although enjoying the job is critical to mission success, the seriousness of our profession must be intrinsic, not simply an act we perform while wearing the uniform.

**4. The Depth of Character to be Hard but Fair** — Squad leaders must let their paratroopers know that they empower performers, forgive ignorance, and punish dishonesty or dereliction. To be successful, squad leaders must seem approachable to those they are responsible for. If not, the platoon's lines of communication will break down, and this failure will reflect in command climate surveys and reenlistment numbers. Keep this line of communication open with impartial rewards and punishments that are proportional and creative, and problems will begin to solve themselves.

Identifying the most admirable traits squad leaders should possess is only half of the fight and arguably the less decisive of the two halves. We must now develop a course of action by using these four pillars of a squad leader as the foundation for a pathway that instills these pillars within our formations. This course of action consists of four training tools that support the pillars by building on the cognitive, social, and physical dynamics so critical to leadership development and organizational performance. We chose to use anecdotes from Charlie Company to demonstrate how each of these tools can and does reinforce the pillars.

***Know and teach your unit's history (social development).***



**A Charlie Company squad leader maintains physical control of his team as he engages targets in a rolling "T" formation while entering and clearing a trench during squad live-fire exercises. Notice the orange markers used as direct fire control measure redundancies to communicate visually with the support-by-fire position as the squad moves through the trench.**

Squad leaders must connect their troops to something outside their finite existence by making them aware they are part of a long-standing military family rich with valor and sacrifice. Part of this process involves educating our formations about the often unknown heritage they associate with in their daily lives. For example, one of our platoons developed a comprehensive study guide for team leaders and below that the squad leaders are responsible for promoting. A section of this study guide is dedicated to understanding the meaning behind the names of Fort Bragg's main roads and drop zones. Not only does this force socialization and make a physical training session on Ardennes or a jump onto Holland Drop Zone more meaningful, it also serves as a constant reminder of how much previous generations of paratroopers sacrificed to allow us the privilege of running on that road or jumping onto that drop zone. As a result, paratroopers develop loyalty to their organization and its members, thereby nurturing that social bond between Infantrymen that serves as the decisive factor in combat. This tool is nested directly with the pillars of stewarding the profession and solving morale problems.

**Counsel often and informally with a focus on expectation**

**management (cognitive and social development).** Squad leaders are at a decisive point in their careers when they will be forced to make major decisions that dictate their long-term potential for military service. These decisions range from attending professional development schools that will impact the trajectory of their careers to reenlistments that will likely put them beyond 10 years of time in service. Their experiences and choices during this period are critical to their development and the vitality of our force. The NCO Evaluation Report (NCOER) is a major component in this process. To retain the most capable NCOs, Charlie Company leaders use a NCOER binder for inspiration and reference while counseling and writing their NCOERs. This binder is a collection of well-written NCOERs with all personally identifiable information removed. Squad leaders may refer to this folder for guidance when writing their team leaders' reports, which serves as a professional development tool for both the team leader and the squad leader.

Counseling of our squad leaders generally focuses on structuring a realistic glide path for that leader's career, and we strive to personalize the profession of arms by engaging in off-post functions. While maintaining an appropriate degree of professionalism, leaders

should get out of the workplace and mold their squad leaders in a comfortable environment that humanizes their leadership position in accordance with the Be-Know-Do trinity. This professional development tool can take the form of a squad leader barbecue at the platoon leader's or platoon sergeant's house, or an off-post physical training session followed by breakfast. Some of the best ideas and counseling sessions may be discovered out of uniform in an informal social environment. If squad leaders feel welcomed and comfortable among this new echelon of leadership, they will be eager to excel and earn positions of greater responsibility.

**Force them out of their comfort zone (cognitive, social, and physical development).** Seek opportunities to expand squad leaders' influence as far as possible outside their scope of responsibility. In one instance, we had a Master Fitness Trainer-qualified squad leader plan, resource, and execute a company-level training schedule consisting of progressive conditioning events that culminated in a 25-mile road march. When squad leaders impact the company fight, growth is inevitable, and they are forced to identify and solve problems (in accordance with the first pillar of squad leadership).

Another part of forcing leaders outside of their comfort zone involves finding their weaknesses and drilling them. In Charlie Company, when we begin our eight-step training model, we try to avoid selecting our strongest paratroopers as primary trainers (following the fourth pillar of being tough but fair). This requires a bit more oversight, but the payoff is immense. Tacit or introverted Soldiers may break through their shell if afforded sufficient guidance and given the opportunity to own a period of instruction that they must present to their peers.

**Finally, empower your NCOs by encouraging ideas (cognitive, social, and physical development).** Although in the Infantry we spend more time defending democracy than practicing it, senior leaders must avoid the tendency to exclude squads from the planning process. Make squad leaders brainstorm and come up with solutions, develop courses of action, and execute them while the platoon leader and platoon sergeant supervise and refine. Do not be afraid to challenge the status quo by breaking through the curse of knowledge so ubiquitous among the upper NCO ranks. Identify aspects of the training calendar or physical training schedule that are redundant, uninteresting, or simply “the way we’ve always done it,” and have the squad leaders implement change. Examples of this include Charlie Company’s focus on functional strength progression, integration of performance experts into range operations, and our interoperability with the Special Forces community. These valuable training opportunities came to fruition through initiative and resourcefulness often generated at the squad level. In most cases, squad leaders proposed courses of action based on their skillsets and the recommendations of their paratroopers. This allows squad leaders to expand their scope of influence and serve as role

models as they increase the explosive power, overall fitness, and marksmanship proficiency of their company. Empowerment is a word we often use but rarely transform into a tangible system.

Although squad leaders are still capable of change at this point in their life, their growth towards becoming ideal leaders begins as a rifleman and takes shape as a team leader. This process of building on the four pillars using cognitive, social, and physical development tools should start as early as possible in Soldiers’ careers. Despite some studies that argue leadership traits are in some ways inherent and often instilled in leaders during early childhood by parents or mentors, based on our experience and the examples of NCOs such as Audie Murphy, we believe superior leaders can be molded. These four courses of action can help build Infantrymen who are capable of fostering lethal, agile, and adaptive teams. In the ever-changing and often unpredictable threat environment within which our troops must operate, building inspiring squad leaders remains critical to fighting and winning our nation’s wars.

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At the time this article was written, **1LT Michael P. Ferguson** was serving as a rifle platoon leader in Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, NC. Prior to commissioning, Ferguson was a sergeant first class and Ranger instructor with the 4th Ranger Training Battalion at Fort Benning, GA. His operational experience includes deployments to Ramadi, Iraq, before the Anbar Awakening, and more than a year as an infantry scout team leader in Afghanistan with the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 4th BCT, 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, KY. 1LT Ferguson has a master’s degree in homeland security, is a graduate of the Maneuver Senior Leaders Course, and is a member of the Order of Saint Maurice.

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*An automatic rifleman engages targets with his M249 squad automatic weapon during a squad live-fire exercise. The automatic rifleman was part of a support-by-fire element that suppressed targets from an elevated position to allow the maneuver element to close with and destroy the enemy on the objective. Squad leader implementation of direct fire control measures is critical during this phase of execution.*